

**Categorical Eligibility for Free Meals for Participants
in the Even Start Family Literacy Programs**

Purpose:

This instruction sets forth the policy regarding the Department of Agriculture's (USDA) automatic eligibility for free meals for participants in the Even Start Family Literacy Programs.

Scope:

Sponsors of the National School Lunch Program (NSLP), the School Breakfast Program (SBP) and/or the Special Milk Program (SMP).

Description:

The purpose of this instruction is to extend categorical eligibility to participants in the Even Start Family Literacy Programs.

1. Public Law 105-336 reinstated categorical eligibility for certain pre-kindergarten children who are enrolled in the Even Start Family Literacy Program. Categorical eligibility is based upon the student's participation in another federal program, in this case, the Even Start Family Literacy Programs.

2. Statutory language sets forth three criteria that must be met in order to be categorically eligible for free meals:

- a. The school or institution that is providing the child with Even Start must be participating in NSLP, SBP, or the SMP.
- b. A child must be enrolled as a participant in a federally funded Even Start Family Literacy Program.
- c. Only those Even Start participants who have not yet entered kindergarten are considered categorically eligible for free meals. Once a child has entered kindergarten, that child loses her/her categorical eligibility for free meals under Even Start.

3. To implement this provision, the following applies:

Documentation of Even Start Participants – In order to establish categorical eligibility for free meals, participation in the Even Start Program AND confirmation that the child has not yet entered kindergarten must be established. Sufficient documentation of Even Start participation could include:

- an approved Even Start application for the child's family; or
- a statement of enrollment in Even Start; or
- a list of children participating in Even Start.

If this documentation is readily available to the official designated by the institution to determine eligibility for free meals, no further action is necessary. If it is not readily available, the documentation must also include the certification on behalf of the Even Start Family Literacy office, signed and dated by the local project director or individual authorized to provide such certification.

4. Re-certification of Categorical Eligibility – At the beginning of each year, the determining official must re-establish categorical eligibility qualifications for each Even Start child.

5. Record Retention – The Even Start eligibility information, and, if applicable, the list of eligible participants, must be maintained on file in accordance with the regulations governing the Child Nutrition Programs, a minimum of three years from the end of the fiscal year to which the information applies. These records must be readily available for review by the USDA, the State agency, or other appropriate agencies.

6. When a child is no longer categorically eligible for free meals under the Even Start Family Literacy criteria, the child's family must be provided with an Application for Free and Reduced-price Meals and Other Benefits so they may:

- establish income eligibility for free or reduced-price meal benefits in the NSLP, SBP, and SMP, or
- establish categorical eligibility under another program, e.g., Food Stamps or TANF

The school or institution must provide instructions on how to apply for these benefits.

SOURCE: FNS MEMO, DATED DECEMBER 3, 1998, USDA, FOOD AND NUTRITION SERVICE; FY 00 NATIONAL SCHOOL PROGRAM #5-00.